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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: THE GOLAN: RESISTANCE RHETORIC, PEACE FEELERS,
AND REGIME EXPECTATIONS

REF: A. TEL AVIV 0421

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 0151

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[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: IN THE PAST EIGHT MONTHS, PUBLIC MENTION OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS ISSUE HAS RECURRED WITH MUCH GREATER FREQUENCY THAN IN PREVIOUS YEARS. THE ASAD REGIME HAS USED IT TACTICALLY IN DIFFERENT WAYS, FOR EXAMPLE, TO EXPRESS SHARED OBJECTIVES WITH HIZBALLAH LAST AUGUST, AND MORE RECENTLY TO SERVE AS THE PROP FOR ASAD REMINDERS OF WHAT HE TERMS SYRIAS LONG-STANDING "STRATEGIC CHOICE" FOR PEACE. SOME CONTACTS DISMISS THE CREDIBILITY OF A SYRIAN GROUP THAT CLAIMS IT HAS ORGANIZED TO LIBERATE THE GOLAN, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT IT HAS BEEN CREATED BY THE SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES AND MILITARY TO SERVE A FIRST RESPONSE FORCE IN THE EVENT OF ANY ISRAELI ATTACK. CONTACTS EXPRESS FUNDAMENTALLY OPPOSING VIEWS ABOUT WHETHER THE ASAD REGIME WANTS -- AND IS ABLE -- TO MAKE A PEACE DEAL WITH ISRAEL. MANY CONTACTS CLAIM THAT THE USG HAS BEEN TOO QUIET ON THE GOLAN ISSUE, HURTING ITS CREDIBILITY WHEN IT HAS CALLED FOR RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN SYRIA. WE AGREE WITH THE CONSENSUS AMONG OUR CONTACTS THAT SARG RECOGNIZES THE DANGER THAT OVERLY PROVOCATIVE ACTION ON THE GOLAN COULD POSE TO THE REGIME AND TO SYRIA AND THEY ARE LIKELY TO LIMIT PREPARATIONS IN THE GOLAN TO ACTIONS THAT WOULD AVOID PROVOKING ISRAELI MILITARY ACTION THERE. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) GOLAN ISSUE AT FOREFRONT: OVER THE PAST EIGHT MONTHS, PUBLIC MENTION OF THE ISRAELI-OCCUPIED GOLAN HEIGHTS HAS RECURRED WITH GREATER FREQUENCY IN SYRIA THAN IN RECENT YEARS, BEGINNING IN AUGUST 2006, IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE HIZBALLAH-ISRAEL HOSTILITIES. AT THAT TIME, A LITTLE-KNOWN GROUP CALLING ITSELF THE COMMITTEES FOR THE LIBERATION OF THE GOLAN, SUPPOSEDLY BASED ON THE SYRIAN SIDE OF THE GOLAN, ISSUED A STATEMENT NOTING THAT IT MODELED ITSELF ON THE EXAMPLE OF HIZBALLAH AND THREATENING TO ABDUCT ISRAELI SOLDIERS TO EXCHANGE THEM FOR SYRIANS HELD CAPTIVE IN ISRAEL. (NOTE: ACCORDING TO THE ICRC, THERE ARE SOME 20 SUCH SYRIANS, MOST OF THEM DRUZE FROM THE GOLAN, IN ISRAELI JAILS.) AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME, PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASAD, IN A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND SPEECHES, SHARPENED HIS RHETORIC IN DISCUSSING THE GOLAN, NOTING THAT RESISTANCE, BOTH POLITICAL AND MILITARY, IS AN OPTION IF PEACE NEGOTIATIONS DID NOT SEEM A REALISTIC POSSIBILITY. IN HIS NOW-INFAMOUS AUGUST 15 "HALF-MEN" SPEECH, FOR EXAMPLE, ASAD SOUGHT TO RE-TOOL HIS (AND HIS FATHERS) LONG-STANDING "PEACE AS A STRATEGIC OPTION" INTO A PAN-ARABIST CELEBRATION OF HIZBALLAH'S "VICTORY" AND OF THE IMPORTANCE OF RESISTANCE IN

CONFRONTING MILITARY OCCUPATION.

13. (C) ASAD'S SHARPENED RHETORIC ABANDONED: ASAD'S BELLICOSE RHETORIC --AS WELL AS PRESS REFERENCES TO THE GOLAN LIBERATION GROUP -- FADED SOON AFTER, ALTHOUGH OTHERS CONTINUED TO USE IT. SYRIAN INFORMATION MINISTER MOHSIN BILAL IN NOVEMBER 2006 WAS QUOTED IN REMARKS HE MADE ON THE SYRIAN SIDE OF THE GOLAN AS SAYING THAT "IF IN THE COMING MONTHS THERE WILL NOT BE A POLITICAL SOLUTION, MILITARY RESISTANCE WILL BE THE ONLY SOLUTION FOR SYRIANS." IN FEBRUARY 2007, AS THE BA'ATH PARTY COMMEMORATED THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ISRAELI ANNEXATION OF THE GOLAN, ANOTHER STATEMENT FROM THE COMMITTEES FOR THE LIBERATION OF THE GOLAN SURFACED, WITH ITS MEMBERS CLAIMING TO BE IN A POSITION TO EXCHANGE AN ISRAELI MIA FOR SYRIAN PRISONERS.

14. (C) RESISTANCE GROUP OR IRREGULAR DEFENSE FORCE: SOME CONTACTS DISCOUNT THE SERIOUSNESS OF THIS GOLAN LIBERATION GROUP, DESCRIBING IT AS A SHELL CREATED BY THE ASAD REGIME. (COMMENT: SOME PRESS ACCOUNTS REPORT THE CREATION OF TWO SEPARATE GOLAN LIBERATION GROUPS. IT IS UNCLEAR IF THERE ARE TWO DISTINCT GROUPS, OR MERELY PRESS CONFUSION ABOUT THE NAME OF THE SHADOWY ORGANIZATION.) THESE CONTACTS ALSO QUESTIONED WHETHER THE SARG WOULD ALLOW AN ARMED NON-STATE ACTOR MODELED ON HIZBALLAH TO FUNCTION AS AN ARMED RESISTANCE GROUP IN SYRIA, EVEN IF CONDITIONS IN SYRIA FAVORED THE NATURAL DEVELOPMENT OF SUCH A GROUP (WHICH THEY DON'T), FOR FEAR IT MIGHT POSE A THREAT TO THE REGIME. THE GOLAN GROUPS STRIDENT STATEMENTS ARE USED BY THE REGIME AS PROPS TO LEND A DEGREE OF CREDIBILITY TO THE SHARPENED RHETORIC -- AND OCCASIONAL THREATS -- VOICED PERIODICALLY BY ASAD AND OTHER SYRIAN OFFICIALS TO PERSUADE ISRAEL AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT SYRIA HAS A MILITARY OPTION IF NEGOTIATIONS REMAIN A DISTANT PROSPECT, ACCORDING TO THESE CONTACTS. THERE ARE SOME INDICATIONS THAT GROUP HAS BEEN CREATED BY THE SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES AND MILITARY -- AND IS BEING ASSISTED BUT CLOSELY MONITORED BY THEM -- TAKING SOME LIMITED TACTICAL LESSONS FROM HIZBALLAH'S PLAYBOOK, TO SERVE AS AN IRREGULAR, FIRST-RESPONSE FORCE IN THE EVENT OF ANY ISRAELI ATTACK.

15. (C) ASAD RE-SENDS PEACE FEELERS: PRESIDENT ASAD MEANWHILE CHANGED COURSE IN THE LATE FALL, LEAVING THE STRIDENT RHETORIC TO OTHERS AND MAKING OVERTURES TO THE ISRAELIS THROUGH NUMEROUS PRESS INTERVIEWS. THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN REGIONAL PRESS REPORTS IN JANUARY 2007 DETAILING "TRACK TWO" UNOFFICIAL TALKS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SYRIA THAT LASTED FOR OVER TWO YEARS. ASAD IN HIS PUBLIC STATEMENTS HAS IN ESSENCE RE-STATED THE POSITION THAT THE SARG HAS MAINTAINED IN THE PAST FEW YEARS: SYRIA IS READY FOR TALKS, WITHOUT PRE-CONDITIONS, AND EVENTUAL FULL PEACE WITH ISRAEL. SINCE THE HIZBALLAH-ISRAEL HOSTILITIES, THE SYRIANS SEEMED BOLSTERED FOR A PERIOD BY RENEWED PUBLIC EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST IN GOLAN NEGOTIATIONS -- AND ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ROLE OF SYRIA -- MADE BY A RANGE OF ISRAELI OFFICIALS AND FORMER SENIOR OFFICIALS.

16. (C) A FEW SIGNS THE GOLAN COULD BE HEATING UP: MORE RECENTLY, HOWEVER, THERE ARE SOME INDICATIONS THAT BOTH SIDES HAVE BECOME MORE CONCERNED ABOUT WHAT MIGHT DEVELOP ON THE GOLAN IN THE COMING MONTHS, POSSIBLY AS PART OF A RE-ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND HIZBALLAH. IN THE PAST TWO MONTHS THE TWO SIDES HAVE TRADED PUBLIC ACCUSATIONS (WITH WARNINGS) ABOUT THE OTHER'S REPORTED PROVOCATIVE ACTIONS ON THE GOLAN, WHETHER ISRAELI WAR GAMES OR SYRIAN DEPLOYMENT OF ROCKETS AND RE-POSITIONING OF FORCES. (UNDOF CONTACTS HAVE TOLD DATT THAT THE BORDER AREA HAS REMAINED CALM, WITH NO TRUCE SIGNIFICANT TRUCE VIOLATIONS OR SPIKE IN MILITARY ACTIVITY ON THE SYRIAN SIDE OF THE GOLAN. THERE HAVE BEEN SOME IMPROVEMENTS IN SYRIAN MILITARY POSITIONS JUST OUTSIDE THE GOLAN AREAS UNDER UNDOF OBSERVATION.) THESE SIGNS OF CONCERN ON THE SYRIAN SIDE HAVE BEEN HEAVILY INFLUENCED BY THE SYRIAN STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT THAT ISRAEL REMAINS DISTURBED BY THE DAMAGE DONE TO ITS STRATEGIC DOCTRINE OF DETERRENCE IN THE FIGHTING WITH HIZBALLAH LAST SUMMER AND NEEDS ANOTHER ROUND OF FIGHTING TO UPEND THE STATUS QUO AND RESTORE ITS DETERRENCE.

17. (C) ASSESSING ASADS DESIRE FOR GOLAN DEAL: REGARDING THE ASAD REGIME'S ABILITY AND DESIRE TO REACH A DEAL ON THE GOLAN AND A PEACE AGREEMENT WITH ISRAEL, THERE ARE TWO FUNDAMENTALLY OPPOSED VIEWS AMONG OUR CONTACTS. THE MAJORITY ASSESSMENT IS THAT ASAD WANTS -- AND IS ABLE -- TO MAKE A PEACE DEAL WITH ISRAEL THAT WOULD LEAD TO THE RETURN OF THE GOLAN AND NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS. ACCORDING TO THIS VIEW, THE RETURN OF THE GOLAN IS A KEY STRATEGIC INTEREST FOR THE REGIME. WHILE THE REGIME NEEDS "SOVEREIGNTY" OVER ALL OF THE GOLAN, IT COULD BE FLEXIBLE ABOUT ARRANGEMENTS IN SPECIFIC AREAS, ACCORDING TO RIAD ABRASH, A GADFLY ECONOMIST AND ANALYST. ASAD WANTS SUCH A DEAL WITH ISRAEL BECAUSE HE KNOWS SYRIA CANNOT MOVE FORWARD WITH DRASTICALLY NEEDED REFORMS OR NORMALIZE ITS RELATIONS WITH OTHERS IN THE REGION UNTIL IT MAKES SUCH A DEAL.

18. (C) ASAD ALSO RECOGNIZES THAT A PEACE DEAL WOULD GIVE THE REGIME TREMENDOUS LEGITIMACY AND EXTEND ITS LONGEVITY, ACCORDING TO FOREIGN POLICY ANALYST IMAD SHUEIBI, WHO IS CLOSE TO THE REGIME AND OFTEN ECHOES ITS VIEWS. IN THE SHORT TERM, PEACE OVERTURES TO ISRAEL HELP DECREASE SYRIA'S ISOLATION, AND ANY SERIOUS MOVE TOWARDS RENEWED NEGOTIATIONS WOULD COMPLETELY UNDERMINE EFFORTS TO ISOLATE SYRIA AND BOX IN THE REGIME. RESTATING THE SARG'S TRADITIONAL VIEW, SHUEIBI NOTED TO A/DCM THAT THORNY ISSUES LIKE THE PRESENCE OF PALESTINIAN REJECTIONISTS IN DAMASCUS AND THE FUTURE ROLE OF HIZBALLAH IN LEBANON WOULD BE ADDRESSED IN A WAY SATISFACTORY TO ISRAEL, BUT AS A PRODUCT OF THE NEGOTIATIONS OVER THE GOLAN, NOT AS A PRE-CONDITION FOR SUCH NEGOTIATIONS. TO DOUBTERS WHO EXPRESS SKEPTICISM ABOUT SARG'S SINCERITY OR ABILITY TO REACH A FINAL DEAL, SHUEIBI RESPONDS, "YOU SHOULD TEST US. WE ARE READY."

19. (C) SKEPTICS SAY REGIME DOESN'T REALLY WANT A DEAL: A DISSENTING VIEW, PREVALENT AMONG OPPOSITION FIGURES AND OTHERS SKEPTICAL ABOUT THE REGIME, ARGUES THAT THE MINORITY ALAWITE REGIME, COULD NOT AFFORD TO BE TAGGED BY THE SUNNI MAJORITY WITH THE CHARGE OF SELLING OUT SYRIA'S PAN-ARAB PRINCIPLES AND NORMALIZING RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL. ACCORDING TO DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP HEAD (AND FORMER POLITICAL PRISONER) RIAD SEIF, THE REGIME "PLAYS WITH THE GOLAN ISSUE," TO PERSUADE THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT IT WANTS PEACE AND TO CONVINCE SYRIANS THAT IT IS DOING EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO GET BACK THE GOLAN. HOWEVER, THE STATE OF WAR WITH ISRAEL (AND THE OCCUPIED GOLAN) HAS BEEN USED FOR OVER 40 YEARS AS A PRETEXT TO JUSTIFY AUTHORITARIAN RULE BY EMERGENCY LAW. ACCORDING TO SEIF AND OTHERS, THE ASAD REGIME COULD NOT SURVIVE WITHOUT SUCH TOOLS OF REPRESSION.

110. (C) FINALLY, THESE OPPOSITIONISTS ARGUE THAT THE ASAD REGIME LONG AGO MADE AN IMPLICIT DEAL WITH ISRAEL (WHICH OPPOSITIONISTS BELIEVE THE ASAD REGIME STILL CARES ABOUT): IN EXCHANGE FOR SYRIAN DOMINANCE OVER LEBANON, WHICH THE REGIME CONTINUES TO BE OBSESSED ABOUT, IT WOULD CONTINUE TO QUIETLY ACCEDE TO ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF THE GOLAN. PUT ANOTHER WAY, SOME QUESTION WHETHER THE REGIME IS READY AND ABLE TO TRADE LEBANON (AND HIZBALLAH) FOR THE GOLAN, A DEAL THAT WOULD ALSO REQUIRE DUMPING THE PALESTINIAN REJECTIONISTS CARD, THE ALLIANCE WITH IRAN, AND SYRIA'S BAD BOY PAN-ARAB IMAGE AND IDEOLOGY, IN SHORT, COMPLETELY RE-ORIENTING SYRIA'S FOREIGN POLICIES AND REGIONAL POSITION.

111. (C) A NUANCED VIEW IN THE MIDDLE: A NUANCED VIEW SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN ARGUES THAT THE REGIME IS DIVIDED BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO WANT TO SOLVE THE GOLAN PROBLEM AND THOSE WHO WANT TO "PLAY WITH IT AND PROFIT FROM THE PROBLEM," OBSERVED ANALYST SAMIR AL-TAKI, HEAD OF THE SHARQ THINK TANK AND AN INFORMAL MFA ADVISOR. ALTHOUGH AL-TAKI SAYS THAT ASAD IS HARD TO READ, ASAD LEANS IN THE DIRECTION OF WANTING TO SOLVE THE GOLAN ISSUE. AS ANOTHER ANALYST PUT IT, ASAD KNOWS THAT ONCE NEGOTIATIONS START, "THEY CAN'T GO ON FOREVER," INDICATING THAT ASAD WELL KNOWS THEY WOULD LEAD INEVITABLY TO NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL. IN ANSWER TO WHETHER THE ORDINARY SYRIAN IS READY FOR PEACE WITH ISRAEL AND AN ISRAELI EMBASSY IN DAMASCUS, CONTACTS NOTE THAT THE REGIME WOULD HAVE TO "RE-EDUCATE PEOPLE," AS WAS DONE IN EGYPT AND JORDAN, AND THEN QUIETLY BUT INSISTENTLY KEEP A POWERFUL LID ON ANY POPULAR RESENTMENT. IN ANY CASE, THE REGIME CANNOT AFFORD TO

LET THE PERCEPTION SPREAD THAT "THE GOLAN ISSUE IS DEAD" AND THAT THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE INDEFINITELY, EVEN IF THE PROSPECTS OF GETTING PEACE TALKS STARTED IN THE NEAR TERM ARE NOT PROMISING. "IT WILL FIGHT THAT PERCEPTION VIGOROUSLY," SAID AL-TAKI, DESCRIBING IT AS DANGEROUS TO A MINORITY REGIME.

¶12. (C) CONTACTS CRITICIZE U.S. SILENCE ON GOLAN: IN DISCUSSING THE GOLAN, MANY CONTACTS CLAIM THAT THE USG HAS BEEN TOO QUIET ON THE ISSUE. OPPOSITION FIGURES LIKE MICHEL KILO AND YASSIN HAJ SALEH HAVE TOLD A/DCM IN THE PAST THAT IF THE U.S. WANTS TO HAVE CREDIBILITY WHEN IT CRITICIZES THE REGIME AND CALLS FOR DEMOCRACY IN SYRIA AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, IT ALSO NEEDS TO MENTION PUBLICLY -- AND CONSISTENTLY -- THE OCCUPIED GOLAN HEIGHTS AND EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF ITS EVENTUAL RETURN TO SYRIAN VIA A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT. HAJ SALEH DESCRIBED THE RETURN OF THE GOLAN TO SYRIA AS "THE BIGGEST GIFT TO DEMOCRACY" THAT THE U.S. AND THE REST OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY COULD MAKE, (IMPLYING THAT IT WOULD END THE STATE OF WAR WITH ISRAEL AND UNDERCUT THE PRETEXT FOR AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN SYRIA).

¶13. (C) POLLING SYRIANS ON GOLAN ISSUE: FOR ORDINARY SYRIANS, THERE IS OBVIOUSLY STILL A GREAT DEAL OF CONCERN ABOUT A PART OF SYRIAN LAND BEING OCCUPIED. A RECENT POLL DONE ON BEHALF OF THE SYRIAN SECURITY SERVICES (WHICH A CONTACT OBTAINED AND SHARED WITH US), INDICATES THAT AFTER BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES RELATING TO STANDARD OF LIVING (38 PERCENT) AND ABOUT CONCERNS ABOUT STABILITY (25 PERCENT), THE ISSUE OF THE RETURN OF THE GOLAN (24 PERCENT) IS A MATTER OF MAJOR CONCERN TO SYRIANS. WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE PROSPECTS FOR ITS RETURN, 58 PERCENT BELIEVED A SOLUTION WAS AT LEAST TEN YEARS AWAY, WHILE 26 PERCENT THOUGHT A SOLUTION COULD COME WITHIN FIVE YEARS, AND 16 PERCENT WITHIN TWO YEARS. REGARDING THE BEST WAY TO OBTAIN THE RETURN OF THE GOLAN, 50 PERCENT SUPPORTED A PEACEFUL SOLUTION, 28 PERCENT SUPPORTED "RESISTANCE," AND 22 PERCENT CALLED FOR A MILITARY OPTION.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: OBVIOUSLY THE GOLAN LOOMS LARGE AS AN ISSUE BOTH TO THE REGIME AND TO SYRIANS IN GENERAL, DESPITE THE POLLING DATA SHOWING OTHER MORE PRESSING DAY-TO-DAY CONCERNS. REGIME INTENTIONS ARE DIFFICULT TO READ, ALTHOUGH OPPOSITION SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE REGIMES DESIRE FOR A GOLAN DEAL SEEMS A BIT OVERSTATED. IN THE END THE REGIME SEEMS VERY INTERESTED IN RE-STARTING A NEGOTIATIONS PROCESS, FOR ITS OWN INTERESTS, OF COURSE. AND ITS SAVVIEST ELEMENTS MUST RECOGNIZE THAT SUCH NEGOTIATIONS, IF ENTERED, WOULD NOT LIKELY GO ON FOREVEQ AT PRESENT, THE REGIME UNDERSTANDS THAT THERE IS LITTLE LIKELIHOOD FOR NEGOTIATIONS GETTING UNDERWAY, SO IT IS TRYING TO USE THE GOLAN ISSUE TO ITS ADVANTAGE IN THE MEANTIME. WE AGREE WITH THE CONSENSUS AMONG OUR CONTACTS THAT THAT SARG RECOGNIZES THE DANGER THAT OVERLY PROVOCATIVE ACTION COULD POSE TO THE REGIME AND TO SYRIA, AND THAT THE REGIME, EXCEPT FOR SOME EFFORTS AIMED AT RESISTANCE, PROPAGANDA, OR LOW-LEVEL HARASSMENT NOT TIED TO DIRECT MILITARY ACTION, IS UNLIKELY TO TAKE OFFENSIVE ACTION, EVEN COVERT THAT MIGHT PROMPT MASSIVE ISRAELI RETALIATION. WHILE THE REGIME WORRIES ABOUT ANOTHER ROUND OF ISRAELI-HIZBALLAH FIGHTING THAT COULD DRAG THEM IN, THEY ARE LIKELY TO LIMIT PREPARATIONS IN THE GOLAN TO ACTIONS THAT WOULD AVOID PROVOKING ISRAELI MILITARY ACTION THERE.

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